

‘God, the Father Almighty’: A Theological Excursus

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Abstract: The confession of ‘God, the Father Almighty’ in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, can be interpreted as offering a progressively more focused characterisation of the First Person of the Trinity, such that ‘Father’ clarifies the meaning of ‘God’, and the force of ‘Almighty’ is controlled by the meaning of ‘Father’. The results of such an exegesis accentuate divine transcendence in way that raises questions about theological claims to natural knowledge of God. More specifically, they suggest that the very comprehensiveness of God’s relationship to the world implied by divine almightiness blocks any direct line of inference from creation to Creator.

The Apostles and Nicene Creeds both begin with the same affirmation: belief in ‘God, the Father almighty’. Although the Nicene Creed dates only from the fourth century, and the Apostles’ Creed is, in its current form, even later, the language of ‘God, the Father almighty’ is of very ancient vintage, as is shown in part by the very fact that these two creeds, which derive from otherwise rather different ecclesial and linguistic contexts within the ancient Mediterranean world (viz., eastern Greek and western Latin), employ virtually identical terminology. As the subsequent wording of both creeds shows, the focus of this way of identifying the object of Christian faith is the affirmation of God’s status as ‘creator of heaven and earth’. Thus, to speak of God as ‘the Father almighty’ is to identify God as the source and ground of all that is

not God.¹ In this way, the creedal phrase ‘God, the Father almighty’ serves to characterise God’s relationship to the world in its entirety, including (to use the more expansive language of the Nicene Creed) ‘all that is, seen and unseen’.

While this ontological claim would seem to render an epistemic connection between knowledge of the world and knowledge of God entirely natural, I will argue that the all-encompassing character of the creator-creature relation makes any inference from world to God problematic. I will do this by offering an exegesis of the phrase, ‘God, the Father almighty’, in which each term is taken in sequence as offering a progressively more focused characterisation of the First Person of the Trinity. The point of this exercise is to argue that while the resulting portrait of God entails a maximally comprehensive vision of divine involvement in the world, that very comprehensiveness renders doubtful the attempt to find evidence for it in the everyday course of earthly events. In short, I will argue that God’s status as creator renders creation epistemically opaque with respect to knowledge of God, rendering untenable any direct line of inference from creature to Creator, in the form of claims that the beauty or order of the world reveal God.²

¹ Although the Old Roman Creed lacked the words ‘creator of heaven and earth,’ they were arguably superfluous, since ‘where the term ‘Father’ was used’ in the late second century ‘the reference was to God in His capacity as Father and creator of the universe.’ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 136; cf. p. 372.

² Throughout this paper I use the English terms ‘almighty’ and ‘omnipotent’ interchangeably. I do this on the grounds that these terms are more familiar and idiomatic to English-speakers, though they have the disadvantage of being all too easily understood as affirming divine power in the abstract (and so as entailing, e.g.,

God

My claim for the epistemic opacity of creation with respect to God might seem to be cast in doubt immediately by two facts: first, that all languages seemingly have words for divinity and, second, that Christians have from the church's earliest days routinely appropriated these words to designate the God of Jesus Christ. It would seem legitimate to infer from this practice that Christians have a high degree of confidence that there is a natural knowledge of God available to human beings everywhere, regardless of their relationship to Jesus, Israel, or the church. And, of course, as a matter of fact most Christians have viewed natural knowledge of God as a genuine feature of human experience across different cultures and historical epochs. In arguing otherwise, I am adopting a minority position in the tradition. Nevertheless, I do not believe the linguistic fact of the ubiquity of God language is evidence of natural knowledge of God. This is not to say that the fact that God-talk appears across human languages and cultures is without significance. Quite the contrary, the fact that God-talk is found in various times and places across cultures does suggest something about the way in which the knowledge of God that comes through revelation relates to general human habits of speech.³ But I want to argue that this

God's ability to do anything that does not entail a logical contradiction, which is generally not something Christians want to affirm). As noted in the third section of this essay below, 'all-ruler' is a better translation of the biblical (and Nicene) Greek *pantokratōr*, which casts divine 'might' as God's active sovereignty over all things rather than possession of power in the abstract.

³ I use the term 'revelation' to designate what in some theological systems is called 'special revelation', viz., the second-person self-disclosure of the God of Jesus Christ. Given that I am arguing that there is no other means of coming to know God (i.e., that

relationship is not one in which these generic modes of God-talk reflect an imperfect-but-genuine (viz., ‘natural’) knowledge of God that might serve as a stepping stone to a more perfect knowledge disclosed through revelation; rather, I contend that such talk simply marks out the linguistic space where God-talk comes to be located in the light of revelation.

Although Thomas Aquinas might seem an odd choice of a theologian cited to support this claim, I believe that his famous ‘five ways’ are apposite here as a way of clarifying the point I want to make.⁴ While Thomas clearly thinks that the ‘ways’ are rational demonstrations,⁵ he casts them less as the source of logically certain conclusions (‘therefore God exists’) than as a series of linguistic observations about the logical and phenomenological circumstances that give rise to God-talk (‘this is what everybody understands by “God”’ or ‘this is what we call “God”’).⁶ In light of the radical contingency and dependence of the entities that make up our world (whether with respect to their origin, development, or end), we are inevitably led to reflect on the overarching context that frames our experience of reality as a whole –

there is no ‘general revelation’), the modifier is superfluous within the theological framework I employ.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] 1.2.3, 60 vols. (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1964-1981).

⁵ For example, he characterizes them as means by which ‘God can be proven [*probari*] to exist’ at the very beginning of the *responsio* to qu. 2, art. 3

⁶ See also *ST* 1.2.2.2, where Thomas signals that the point of his demonstrations is simply to show ‘what we are using the name of the thing to mean’.

and there, Thomas argues, is where God-talk emerges.⁷ From this perspective, ‘God’ is arguably not so much an explanatory hypothesis designed to account for particular phenomena as an orienting point for reflection on the ontological horizon of human experience.⁸ God can therefore be said to ‘appear’ in the world at the limits of human thinking – but only in the sense of a verbal token that marks where our resources for speaking dry up, and not in the sense of experiences of God that reveal what (let alone who) God is.⁹

That Thomas himself maintains a healthy sobriety with respect to the possibility of ‘natural’ knowledge of God is shown by how he proceeds after his presentation of the five ways. He introduces the subsequent set of questions in the *Summa* as follows:

⁷ Rowan Williams interprets Thomas as arguing that, ‘the interpretive context that holds together the entire realm of causality and dependence is what is generally meant by “God.”’ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 7.

⁸ Here Thomas’s own characterization of the five ways as reasoning from effect to cause is liable to mislead, as is evident from the common objection that positing God as the terminus of the causal chain is arbitrary. God is ‘cause’ here not as a means of accounting for the existence of a particular effect, but rather for the whole system of cause-and-effect that marks our experience of the world. As applied to God, in other words, the word ‘cause’ – like every word – must be understood analogically.

⁹ ‘God’s effects, therefore, can serve to demonstrate that God exists [*demonstrari Deum esse*], even though they cannot help us to know him comprehensively for what he is [*ipsum cognoscere secundum suam essentiam*].’ Thomas, *ST*, 1.2.2.3.

Having recognized *that* something exists, we still have to investigate *the way in which* it exists, that we may come to understand *what it is* that exists. Now we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does.¹⁰

Normally, once it has been determined that something exists, the next step is to investigate how it exists, so that we may understand what it is. But with God this is not possible, because God is not ‘something;’ indeed, Thomas argues, though we may have determined that God exists, God is such that our only recourse after having determined this fact is to problematise it by showing that all further (‘natural’) talk about God is justified only insofar as it describes the ways in which God does *not* exist. In other words, once the semantic space that ‘what everybody understands by “God”’ occupies has been identified, there is no possibility for going on from there to fill in the content of ‘God.’ Instead, we can do no more than show how the categories we normally use to describe existents do *not* apply to God. Thus, while it is true that God exists, because God does not exist as other entities do, God’s ‘existence’ must be distinguished in the sharpest possible way from that of every other existent.

There is no space here to explore the details of how Thomas goes about describing ‘the ways in which God does not exist’. What counts is the principle that identifying the semantic space occupied by ‘God’ does not generate theological data, but rather helps clarify the basic point that God cannot be known in the way that other entities are known (i.e., as some *thing* that can be distinguished from other somethings). For this reason, the recognition that ‘God’ delimits a semantic space for God-talk does not mean that natural theology identifies a God-shaped hole in human

¹⁰ Thomas, *ST*, vol. 2, p. 19; translation slightly altered.

experience that is later filled by revelation. Because God's 'existence' is such that God cannot be ranged alongside other entities as one more object in a general inventory, 'what everybody understands by "God"' is not a hypothetical reality (like luminiferous ether or the Higgs boson) whose reality could be confirmed or disconfirmed by the acquisition of more data. The semantic space identified by Thomas in qu. 2 of the *Summa* is, correspondingly, best interpreted not as a window on the divine, but as a point of reference for places where human experience breaks down as a source of knowledge.¹¹ As Rowan Williams put it in his recent Gifford Lectures, if 'what everybody understands by "God"' refers to that which addresses certain fundamental difficulties or aporias of human experience, then revelation 'does not fill a gap, but shows why the gap is there.'¹² That Christian God-talk inserts itself in this gap (i.e., just at the point where 'everybody' uses the word 'God') therefore does not imply continuity between revealed knowledge and general human experience of the world. On the contrary, precisely because God is not the kind of entity that

¹¹ Just to be clear, I am not claiming that Thomas himself would put it this way, since he explicitly frames the *viae* as demonstrations that God exists. But given his own emphasis on the strongly analogical nature of the term 'God' (see, e.g., his discussion of how the pagan and Christian both do and do not mean the same thing by 'God' in ST 1.13.10), there is a case to be made for a minimalist interpretation of the demonstrative force of the *viae* along the lines I propose.

¹² Williams, *The Edge of Words*, p. 180. He explains, 'A natural theology does not deliver either a theory or a vision of the sacred; it identifies where our thinking and speaking about our thinking and speaking come to the point where we either acknowledge an inescapable halting point or begin to re-work the style of our questions.'

could fill any kind of gap in our understanding of the world, revelation necessarily functions as a judgment of our ‘natural’ God-talk by a God who cannot be assigned a place in any categorical scheme and just so offends our ‘natural’ sense of the divine. Even if it is possible *a posteriori* to identify some linguistic connections between our natural forms of God-talk and God as God reveals God’s self to be, in the event of revelation the reality of God invariably challenges our ideas of what God is like.

The Father

Admittedly, the fact that the term ‘God’ is used for God, and that obvious similarities exist between specifically Christian talk about God and ‘what everybody understands by “God”’ can seem to make the question of whether revelation is an interruption or a fulfilment of human beings’ ‘natural’ God-talk far less clear cut than I have been arguing. Consider the following parallel: even if I had for many years mistakenly identified an imposter as the Grand Duchess Anastasia, the discovery of the truth need not entail a wholesale revision of my understanding of the meaning of ‘the Grand Duchess Anastasia’. Now, it is arguable that at least some (if not most) converts to Christianity act as though acceptance of the God of Jesus Christ stands in a similar relation to their previous understandings of God: entailing the verdict that their previous beliefs were indeed false in certain respects, but not only or altogether false.¹³ In order to show why I would still maintain that discontinuity between natural and revealed knowledge of God should be stressed, I will turn from the *Summa*

¹³ Notwithstanding my own use of Thomas above, he is clearly far more inclined to stress continuity between natural and revealed knowledge of God than I am. See, e.g., the way in which he uses the comparatives *plures* and *excellentiores* to describe the relationship between the knowledge of God provided by revelation and that attained by natural reason in *ST* 1.12.13.1.

Theologiae to Anselm's *Proslogion* to argue that genuine knowledge of God is necessarily rooted in second-person encounter (i.e., the direct address of revelation) rather than third-person observation or inference.

With respect to the particulars of Anselm's argument, my contention is that to view God as 'that which exists in the mind only' – the possibility that Anselm disallows – is precisely to treat God in the third person, as an object of speculative or generalised knowledge. Anselm's point is that to think of God (and only of God, insofar as God is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived') in such terms constitutes a category error. It amounts to confusing *God* with one's *idea* of God (i.e., that which exists in the mind), and this confusion is fatal, because however orthodox one's ideas about God may be, they are problematic insofar as they invariably lead one to conceive of God as an object alongside other objects (for such is the nature of 'conceiving').¹⁴ From this perspective, one upshot of Anselm's argument is that while third-person language about God is unavoidable, it is inherently problematic, because we only think (and speak) rightly of God on the basis of knowing God as the one before whom we stand, by whom we are called to account, and who, because only knowable in that way, cannot self-consistently be contemplated as possibly existing or not existing. Here I think it is worth noting that the *Proslogion* itself is cast in the form of a prayer to God – that is, as second-person address by one who is intensely conscious of always standing before God. To know God in this framework is thus to recognise that one may never treat God as a hypothetical entity, but only as the One to whom we have to answer rather than the reverse. It is this understanding of the

¹⁴ Thus, in spite of Thomas's well-known rejection of Anselm's argument in *ST*,

1.2.2.1, Thomas is arguably making a point similar to Anselm's in his insistence that we can know only the ways in which God does not exist.

conditions of genuine knowledge of God that demands that in articulating the relationship between natural and revealed theology, language of fulfillment take a back seat to language of judgment: being encountered by God in the second person *always* disrupts our reflections on God in the third person, because it necessarily shows that the latter by their very grammar draw us away from God (cf. Job 42:5).

The point here is not that only second-person talk about God is allowed (in which case this very essay would be an illegitimate exercise). We are certainly commanded to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), but that does not mean that human activity is exhausted by prayer. Nor is it the case that objective knowledge of God is impossible, for as we are material creatures who know anything only as it confronts us in time and space, God's confronting us in the second person entails God's taking objective form, whether a burning bush, enhypostatized humanity, or the preached word. My point is only that all third-person statements, if made in the knowledge that the God who graciously takes objective form for us is never reducible to an object in the world, are parasitic on second-person encounter and thus can be true (as Thomas recognised) only by analogy. It is certainly possible to speak truthfully about God in the third person – but only in the recognition that even truthful third-person statements will mislead if treated like grammatically isomorphic statements about created entities.

Turning back now to the creedal phrase, 'God, the Father almighty,' to encounter someone in the second person is to understand that entity as a *who* – that is, precisely as *someone* in addition to *something* – and thus as bearing a name. The shift from 'God' to 'Father' in the creeds marks just this move from third-person to second-person knowledge. For while it is true that in the Old Testament God is occasionally described as 'father' in the generic sense (see, e.g., Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer.

3:19; 31:9f; Mal. 1:6; 2:10; cf. John 8:41), the creedal designation of God as ‘Father’ is quite distinct from this sort of usage. It derives from Jesus’ practice of addressing Israel’s God in the second person as ‘Father’ (see, e.g., Matt. 11:25; Mark 14:36; Luke 23:34, 46; John 11:31; 12:27) – a practice taken up by early Christians on the grounds of their having been brought by grace into the same filial relationship with God that Jesus enjoyed by nature (see Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; cf. John 20:17). In this context, ‘Father’ is not a mere metaphor, but a name.¹⁵ Thus, to speak of God as ‘the Father’ is not to offer a shorthand evaluation of God’s character or qualities, but to pick out or identify a particular entity *as* God. In short, the Christian designation of God as ‘Father’ is not in the first instance an answer to the question, ‘What is God like?’ but rather, ‘Who is God?’

At the same time, this name also does in fact provides information about the character of the divine life. For ‘Father’ is a relative term: God is ‘Father’ (and, indeed, ‘our Father’) because he is ‘Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Eph. 1:3). So even though ‘Father’ is not properly understood as a projection on to the divine of the best features of human fatherhood (quite the contrary according to Eph. 3:15), God’s status as Father is nevertheless genuinely descriptive: it tells us something about *how*

¹⁵ See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 11.5; Thomas, *ST*, 1.31.2. For an analysis of the way in which the development of the Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Spirit was bound up with Christian consciousness of the Tetragrammaton as *the* divinely given name of God, see R. Kendall Soulen, *Distinguishing the Voices*, vol. 1 of *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), especially chapters 2-3.

as well as *who* God is.¹⁶ Most centrally, if God is eternally Father, then it follows (as Athanasius was fond of pointing out) that the one in relation to whom God is (eternally) Father is – equally eternally – Son. The designation ‘Father’ therefore marks God as inherently *generative*: quite apart from and prior to creation, God gives life (see John 5:26; 17:5). Indeed, because God’s status as Father (viz., the One who gives life to the Son) is eternal, the giving of life is integral to God’s being Father – and thus as also of God’s being as the Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. The God who is Father therefore cannot be identified with an eternally self-enclosed Unmoved Mover in the Aristotelian sense; God is rather inherently expansive, living as God by giving rise to and subsisting in relation with another. Moreover, far from being threatened by this eternal and infinite giving of divine being to another, the Father is God precisely as in giving himself away by begetting the Son and breathing forth the Spirit.

Furthermore, although the Father’s productivity is integral to his identity as Father, it is not an automatic or mechanical process. Quite the contrary, the fact that the creeds identify God in the first instance as Father (and not as First Cause or Prime Mover) serves as a reminder that the divine generativity is also *personal*. God is inherently Father, but this status is not a limit on but rather an expression of God’s freedom, such that God is rightly characterized as love (1 John 4:1, 16), and thus as inherently personal. Of course, the New Testament also describes as ‘spirit’ (John 4:24) and ‘light’ (1 John 1:5), but while these terms are evocative of God’s status as

¹⁶ Indeed, in line with the ancient definition of the divine persons or hypostases as *tropoi hyparxeōs*, or ‘modes of being’, we may go so far as to say that ‘Father’ tells us how God is precisely as it tells us who God is. Cf. Thomas, *ST*, 1.40.1: ‘the “what” and the “by what” of divine being do not differ’ (my translation).

living and present, love qualifies the character of this living presence personally as pertaining to an agent who is generous, and whose divinity is thus most properly understood as inherently empowering rather than oppressive.¹⁷

Within the context of the life of the Trinity, therefore, the love of the Father for the Son clarifies that the productivity of the Father takes the form of *gift*. Again, one upshot of this claim is that the life of the Trinity is not an impersonal or automatic process. Rather, God is divine insofar as God is the Father, who begets the Son in the power of the Spirit. In this respect, it is entirely appropriate (and not at all a sign of any intratrinitarian subordinationism) that the creeds should identify God first and principally as Father, since it is the eternal, boundless, and inexhaustible self-giving of the Father that is the root of God's Trinitarian life.¹⁸ To be sure, the love of the Father is eternally answered by that of the Son in the Spirit, and it is just in and as that tripersonal reality that God is love.¹⁹ And yet the Father remains (in the language of

¹⁷ See Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), ch. 2.

¹⁸ In this context, it is worth remembering that Thomas specifies the Father as principle (*principium*) rather than cause (*causa*) of divinity, since 'with regard to every sort of cause, we invariably discover a disparity based on perfection or power between the cause and that of which it is the cause. But we use the word "principle" even with regard to matters wherein there is no such difference, but merely one based on some sort of order' (*ST* 1.33.1.1). In short, for Thomas "'Principle" secures an order without priority.' John Baptist Ku, *God the Father in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 146.

¹⁹ Katherine Sonderegger's efforts to define God as love without reference to specifically Trinitarian considerations strike me as unpersuasive. While she is right to

the Cappadocians) the *monas archē* or sole origin of that loving generativity that is the Trinity. In this respect, it is possible to affirm the Father as the principle not only of the persons, but of the Godhead as such; indeed, the Father ‘is understood to be the principle of the whole divinity *because* he is the principle of all the divine persons’.²⁰ So while there is no Father (and no Trinity) apart from the Son and the Spirit, the Son and the Spirit (and thus the Trinity as such) subsist only through the Father’s free and loving gift of divinity.

In this way my earlier claim that God is not properly spoken of in the third person finds its roots in the very life of the Godhead, where God lives only, so to speak, in the second person, as one-with-another in love. God is not one in monadic solitariness, but as the life of the Father who loves the Son in the Spirit, and who, in turn, is the recipient of the Son’s love in the Spirit’s power. That is, God lives as one who eternally addresses a second as a thou and is thereby addressed as a thou in return, with this mutual love eternally witnessed and shared by the Spirit, through whom the Father glorifies the Son and the Son the Father. Insofar as we know God only as we know (by virtue of having been called to share) this love, we glorify (and

point out that talk of love between the divine persons invariably raises the spectre of tritheism, her attempt to draw a conceptual parallel between love and fragility (viz., an inherent property that need never be manifested) fails because the analogue to fragility is not divine love (which is, willy-nilly, an action), but divine lovableness or (invoking the classic equation of the good as that which is desirable) goodness. See Katherine Sonderegger, *Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 479-90.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, 1, d. 15; cited in Ku, *God the Father in St. Thomas Aquinas*, p. 145; cf. *ST*, 1.39.5.6.

thereby confess) God rightly in making joyous and grateful response to God's call to us through our own in second-person address to God in praise and prayer – one dimension of which is the confession of God as 'almighty'.²¹

Almighty

Throughout much of Christian history, the creedal designation of the Father as 'almighty' was taken as unproblematic. In the modern period, however, it has become more common to see the two terms as standing in some tension. Either the all-encompassing power suggested by the term 'almighty' is rejected (especially by process theologians) as fundamentally incompatible with the character of God as a loving Father, or, contrariwise, it is seen (especially by Christian and post-Christian feminists) as re-enforcing the worst elements of patriarchy by exposing 'Father' as a cipher for the selfish, oppressive, and arbitrary exercise of power over and against others. In either case, the language of almightiness or omnipotence is criticized for implying that divine power is exercised in a unilateral mode that either resists or overwhelms the power of creatures. Since love entails mutuality, it is argued, and since almightiness is incompatible with even the possibility of the give-and-take characteristic of genuine mutuality, a God who is 'almighty' cannot be 'Father,' too – or at least not a loving one.

It is important to concede that this line of criticism does identify a genuine problem with the term, 'almighty,' which can indeed be misappropriated as a

²¹ Although I lack space to develop the point here, even as the Son's glorifying of the Father is inseparable from the Spirit, so the role of the Spirit in our individual responses to the Father's love, insofar as they, too, are mediated by the Spirit (Rom. 8:15-16) are inseparable from the common life of the church, in and through which the Spirit calls and gathers us as God's children (1 Cor. 12:13).

designation for limitless, arbitrary power.²² But the reading of the creedal language that I am proposing here does not treat the pairing of ‘Father’ and ‘almighty’ as the juxtaposition of two equiprimordial terms, but reads them in a definite order of super- and subordination. God is Father first of all, and only *as* Father is almighty as well. The meaning of the latter term must therefore be controlled by the former, such that while we can (and, I will argue, must) confess God as ‘almighty’, we can do so faithfully only as a specification of the more fundamental claim that God is Father.²³

This claim for the priority of ‘Father’ over ‘almighty’ is justified by attention to their place in the Christian doctrine of God. Again, ‘Father’ refers to God’s intrinsic and eternal personal identity, apart from God’s external acts in creation. By contrast, ‘almighty’, the English translation of the biblical *pantokratōr* (Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17 and *passim*), should be taken as referring to God’s lordship over the creation (i.e., all that which is other than God) and not as an affirmation of divine power in the

²² ‘The man who calls ‘the Almighty’ God misses God in the most terrible way. For the ‘Almighty’ is bad, as ‘power in itself’ is bad. The ‘Almighty’ means Chaos, Evil, the Devil. We could not better describe and define the Devil than by trying to think this idea of a self-based, free, sovereign ability.’ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 48.

²³ Jean-Pierre Batut shows that this ordering emerged only gradually in the early church, as Christians struggled to integrate the ‘cosmological’ and ‘Trinitarian’ senses of Father in such a way that the Trinitarian sense of ‘Father’ (viz., its status as a name) was understood to have precedence over the cosmological term *pantokratōr*. Jean-Pierre Batut, *Pantocrator: «Dieu le Père tout-puissant» dans la théologie pré-nicéenne* (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2009), pp. 61-63; cf. 57.

abstract.²⁴ In other words, while God is ‘Father’ *in se*, God is ‘almighty’ only relatively – with respect to that which is other than God. For God does not rule over God’s self: if there is a precedence with respect to intratrinitarian order of the Father with respect to the Son and the Spirit, there is no ruling of the Father over the other two divine persons, who insofar as they possess from the Father the fullness of the Father’s divinity, are every bit as ‘almighty’ as the Father.²⁵

It may not seem at first glance that restricting the import of the term ‘almighty’ to the Father’s relationship to the world is terribly helpful in avoiding the spectre of an arbitrary and tyrannical God. Here again, however, the answer to this concern is to remember that the might in question is that of the *Father*, whose eternal identity consists precisely in giving all that he has – or, better, all that he is – to the Son. Insofar as the creeds state that it is precisely as Father that God is almighty and (therefore) Creator, they imply that divine might – and the work of creation that springs from it – is grounded in the love by which the Father eternally and inexhaustibly begets the Son. In short, the confession that the Father is almighty *ad*

²⁴ Cf. note 2 above. According to Dionysius the Areopagite (*Divine Names*, 10), God is call *pantokratōr* because ‘he preserves and embraces all the world. He founds it. He makes it secure. He holds it together.’ *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 119.

²⁵ See, e.g., Thomas, *ST*, 1.33.1.2. Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Disputation with Pyrrhus*, PG 91:324A-B: ‘obedience is not a property of God but of human beings, as the divine Gregory [of Nazianzus] says.... “God is neither obedient nor disobedient, for such matters pertain to subordinates and those under authority”’.

extra, far from being in tension with the Father's love *ad intra*, derives from it.²⁶

Indeed, if almightiness is interpreted in a more restricted sense to mean only that the Father's action is all-encompassing (rather than all-controlling), then it is possible to say that the Father is intrinsically almighty insofar as in giving away all that he is to the Son, he sustains and 'contains' the Son – but, precisely by virtue of the fullness of the gift, only in such a fashion that the Son also 'contains' the Father in return (John 14:10-11). The almightiness of God in creation is an external analogue of this intratrinitarian structure. Although there is no creaturely containment of God analogous to the Son's reciprocal 'containment' of the Father, it remains the case that even as within the Godhead the mutual life of the persons is rooted in the free and unlimited gift of the Father's being *to* the Son in the Spirit, so the being of creatures in the world reflects the Father's free and unstinting gift of being *through* the Son in the Spirit.²⁷

This Trinitarian framing of God's creative work, in turn, grounds the world's existence exclusively in the love of God in a manner consistent with the doctrine of creation from nothing: just as there is no other factor than the Father's love for the Son in the Spirit that underlies the Trinity, so there is no factor other than the love of

²⁶ So Batut argues (*Pantocrator*, p. 466) that patristic accounts of creation in the Logos imply that '*le secret ultime de l'existence de l'univers...n'est autre que la coïncidence, au plus intime de la vie divine, de la toute-puissance et l'amour.*'

²⁷ The gift of being to creatures is not *unlimited*, because creatures are less than God: for God to give being without limit to creatures (as the Father does to the Son) would make them divine and not creatures; nevertheless, it is *unstinting*, since its limitations are not due to any begrudging of being on God's part, but only to the fact that God constitutes them as creatures, and thus as finite.

the Father for the Son in the Spirit that underlies the being of creatures. In this way, the idea *creation from nothing*, understood as a corollary of the specifically Trinitarian confession of God as almighty, means that the life of creatures is constituted and conditioned by *nothing but God*.²⁸ That the Father is ‘almighty’ does not, therefore, mean that all might is *reserved* to God alone, but rather that all might *derives* from God alone. Because the almighty God is the Father who eternally gives all to the Son in the power of the Spirit, might (power) is emphatically not a quality that God begrudges to others. On the contrary, the work of creation is precisely that by which God gives might to that which is not God – echoing the intratrinitarian process by which the Father gives infinite might to the Son and the Spirit.

Two points follow from this understanding of creation. First, even as the life of the Son, far from threatening the Father’s divinity, establishes it, so the existence of no creature, from the smallest subatomic particle to the highest of the seraphim, can in any sense constitute a threat to God’s power. Instead, a creature’s existence, whatever form it takes, cannot logically be anything but (to those who, having come to know God through revelation, have eyes to see) a witness to God’s power, since God is at every point of every creature’s existence the sole ground of its being in every respect. Within the logic of creation from nothing, even revolt against God is possible only as a creature’s capacities are enabled by God.

Second (and conversely), the Father’s ‘almightiness’ cannot be understood as constituting a possible threat to the integrity of the creature, since whatever being and activity a creature has, it has only by the continuous gift of God in the first place. Since God’s will in making creatures is precisely that they should flourish as the

²⁸ For a more extensive discussion of this point, see McFarland, *From Nothing*, pp.

particular sorts of creatures they are by God's continual gift of being to them, it is a contradiction in terms to suppose that distance from or independence from God could be a possible condition of creatures' flourishing: any such distance or independence could only mean the creature's destruction. That (rational) creatures do, inexplicably, seek such independence indicates a failure to recognize the very conditions of the possibility of their existing at all: in rebelling against God, they violate God's will for their own being and thereby make it impossible for themselves to be. Even here, however, that they can undertake such acts is itself possible only by virtue of God's first granting and then enabling their own characteristic ways of being and acting (viz., as free and responsible agents).²⁹

The very comprehensiveness of God's work in sustaining and empowering creatures confirms the impossibility of drawing any line of inference from our experience of creation to knowledge of God. Since all creatures are equally and absolutely dependent on God for every aspect of their existence and at every point of

²⁹ Based on the logic of divine omnipotence outlined here, the *failure* of creatures to flourish – to experience their being and exercise their capacities fully – constitutes a far more serious threat to divine sovereignty than any manifestation of creatures' capacity for life, movement, and being. In other words, it is in the face of evil that the confession of the Father as 'almighty' arguably chafes against reality. While there is no space here to explore these issues, I would make two points: 1) failure to flourish that is the result of moral evil (i.e., the wilfully perverse acts of rational creatures) is a genuine problem, and 2) failure to flourish connected with what is traditionally named natural evil is arguably more difficult to identify, since the circumstances of creaturely finitude dictate that temporal *limits* to creatures' flourishing cannot as such be equated with a *failure* to flourish.

their existence, no aspect of created reality can in itself provide any privileged line of access to the divine. Nor can the structure of the created order as a whole serve this purpose. Because God transcends all creatures, whether considered individually or as a collective, to the same, infinite degree, one can no more ascend to God via the experience of any particular set of natural phenomena than that Esther Summerson might infer the existence of Charles Dickens based on her experience of the novelistic world of *Bleak House*.³⁰ The connection between God and the world, like that between the author and his novel, is visible only to one who has a view of both – and that is something we do not have – except insofar as God provides that perspective by revealing God’s self within creation. Otherwise, creation remains opaque to God, not because God is distant from it, but precisely because God’s all-compassing relation to the world as ‘the Father almighty’ precludes the creature acquiring any point of epistemic leverage over against the Creator.

Conclusion

This concern brings me back to the question of the discernment of God’s power in creation more generally. I began this paper by calling into question whether the cultural ubiquity of God-talk provides any evidence for the discernment of the God of Jesus Christ apart from revelation. I went on to argue that the idea of any talk about God divorced from revelation is problematic, since it cuts against the properly second-person structure of human knowledge of God. It also confirms what I have referred to as creation’s epistemic opacity to God. But in light of Paul’s claim that

³⁰ Might not Esther reflect on the existence of a Creator God based on her experience of that world? Of course she might. But (to refer back to the first two sections of this essay) whatever ‘God’ she might imagine would not be Charles Dickens.

God's eternal power is, in fact, 'clearly perceived in the things that have been made' (Rom. 1:20), some further discussion of the point is called for.

The central factor to be taken into account when reflecting on this question is God's transcendence: because God is not one item among others in the world and thus not properly conceived in the third person, there can be no progression from 'the things that have been made' to God, because 'things that have been made' can, by their very character as finite realities located in space and time, lead us only to other such things. Here Thomas's second objection in qu. 2 of the *Summa* to the proposition that there is a God is relevant: 'it seems that everything we observe in this world can be fully accounted for by other causes, without assuming a God'.³¹ Thomas's efforts to answer this objection by appealing to the Aristotelian principle that natural causes have a purpose that require reference to a higher cause are unpersuasive. Precisely because God's purpose in creating is simply that the creation should be, the sequence of created causes entails no intrinsic referent to some higher purpose or end – and, indeed, trying to find one is arguably to resort to an instrumentalisation of non-human creatures in particular that has rightly become the focus of much criticism of traditional forms of the doctrine of creation. Because it is rooted in a transcendent Creator, who relates to all creatures with equal immediacy and directness as their source and ground, the divine causal presence in creation inherently invisible. That creation is opaque to God apart from revelation is not, however, a defect, but part of its glory as that which by God's creating and sustaining grace has its own integrity as a system of causes and effects that in its own proper completeness does not require reference to a higher power in order to be understood.

³¹ Thomas, *ST*, 1.2.3.2.

In this way, as Katherine Sonderegger notes, contemporary atheism ‘*testifies* to the truth of the One God, his invisible Deity and Power’.³²

To be sure, the fact that God-talk is seemingly ubiquitous gives some credence to the idea that people everywhere ‘knew God’ (Rom. 1:21), but it is precisely in the context of that sociological fact that I would like to interpret Paul. Yes (and as Thomas also saw), people everywhere talk about ‘God’ on the basis of their experience of the world, but this ‘knowledge’ is such that people invariably ‘became futile in their thinking’ (to continue Paul’s own line of argument in Romans 1), as shown by the universal human failure to ‘honour [God] as God.’ Instead, they invariably confuse God with some lesser reality, whether that be with the concrete forms of ‘mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles’ (Rom. 1:23) or with more abstract notions of first cause, unmoved mover, or most perfect being in what remains a worldly matrix of cause and effect.

Here the manifold perplexities of creaturely finitude and even the intractable mystery of moral evil may actually be a help in clarifying the limits of God-talk. The world we experience may certainly be an occasion for affectionate and awesome wonder, but it may just as easily serve as an occasion for revulsion and horror – as various ‘Gnostic’ movements that have always been found at the periphery of the Christian tradition attest. I can think of no way of adjudicating between these two visions of the world based on human experience: the presumption that wonder necessarily trumps horror has to me little credibility in the face of the depths of pain and alienation suffered by so many of our own species, let alone the varied and to us largely impenetrable experiences of other creatures. What we hold to as Christians are not (third-person) speculative ideas about the character of the world and its

³² Sonderegger, *Doctrine of God*, p. 53.

putative Demiurge, but the (second-person) claim of the One who has promised us that ‘nothing...in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God [shown forth] in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 8:39). Such a promise can only be made credibly by a God who is almighty, that is, by one who, as the sole condition of our own existence and the existence of everything else that is, cannot be checked in the fulfilment of the divine will by any competing power whose ontological independence would place it outside of the divine sovereignty.

There is a paradox in what Paul claims in Rom. 1:20. For he identifies ‘the eternal power and deity’ that he holds to be ‘clearly *perceived* in the things that have been made precisely with God’s ‘*invisible* nature.’ It has long been customary among Christians to identify this perception of the invisible with a movement from phenomenal effect to transcendent cause, but, again, this seems to me a category error, for I see no compelling way of moving securely from the phenomenal to the transcendent, since the phenomenal only yields further phenomena.³³ By contrast, to know God as inherently invisible – indeed, to recognise with Paul that that which can be ‘known’ of God in the world is precisely God’s invisibility – is to know God not as the answer to any question *we* might pose (like, say, ‘Why is there something rather

³³ This account of movement from cause to effect may appear too narrowly conceived in terms of efficient causation, ignoring the possibility that one might view beauty, for example, as allowing a different mode of inference to the divine. But even Hans Urs von Baltasar, for all his emphasis on the continuity between created and divine beauty, understands this continuity to be visible only in light of revelation, and not as grounds for any direct inference from natural beauty to its transcendent analogue. To be sure, appreciation of creaturely beauty disposes us to recognise the divine – but the latter recognition is possible only on God’s (second-person) initiative.

than nothing?), but rather as the One whom comes to be known in questioning *us* (by asking, ‘Will you accept that you and the world you inhabit are something rather than nothing?’). To those who attend to this question – and to the promise implied by it – God’s eternal power and deity are indeed perceived precisely in their invisibility: not as something that can be grasped with the intellect any more than with the eyes, but as that which may be seized in faith and hope as sustaining every part of creation at every moment and drawing it inexorably – despite the impediments that we may see before us – to the good that God intends for all that God has made.